

Report of Ed Smith, Chief,
Baton Rouge Fire Department

Hurricane Katrina Independent Panel Meeting

During the initial days of the storm, Baton Rouge's communications, though taxed, were not overloaded. Our communication's division never lost radio or telephone communication. Due to the fact that the eye of Katrina, passed to the east of Baton Rouge, it brought heavy rains, but not the anticipated hurricane force winds. The local infrastructure was not damaged and all local transmissions were handled.

However, early on, it was obvious that the normal coverage area of the Fire Department of Baton Rouge was going to be expanded by hundreds of miles, and it was obvious one of the first critical hurdles we would have to face was the lack of communication with other agencies and jurisdictions. There were some areas that we were surprised that we could communicate and some areas we were depending on that just did not work. Some of the communications areas that broke down were:

1. Cell phones became unreliable because of damage to their towers and the increase of call volume.
2. Land line telephones were all but destroyed due to the damage to the poles and lines in the area.
3. Radio infrastructures such as repeater towers in the affected areas were destroyed. This rendered the local systems inoperable and the ACU1000 that we use to "patch" our radios into their systems became useless.
4. The common 800 MHz channels (I-CALL and I-TAC) were overwhelmed as they were the only way to communicate via radio with other agencies.
5. Satellite telephones that we acquired were unreliable due to the overwhelming number of phones brought into the area. Our Search

and Rescue Team actually had to borrow phones from news outlets to get important messages out.

There were some communications areas that did seem to deliver some reliability. They were:

1. Emails and text messages sent to cell phones and blackberries. We are not sure why this worked but on several occasions we passed necessary information into and out of affected areas by this means.
2. Direct Talk-to-Talk channels on our existing radios. This worked in the immediate areas. Without having to rely on repeaters the radios would work. Realizing this is not effective for large scale communications but it was definitely the best way for our responders to communicate within their tactical locations.

The Governor, through the State Police, had a working committee on communications prior to the storm. One of their tasks was to look into creating a statewide communications backbone to allow various agencies to use their equipment during emergencies. This system would greatly enhance our interoperability as long as there is also a way to temporarily establish towers in areas where they have been destroyed.